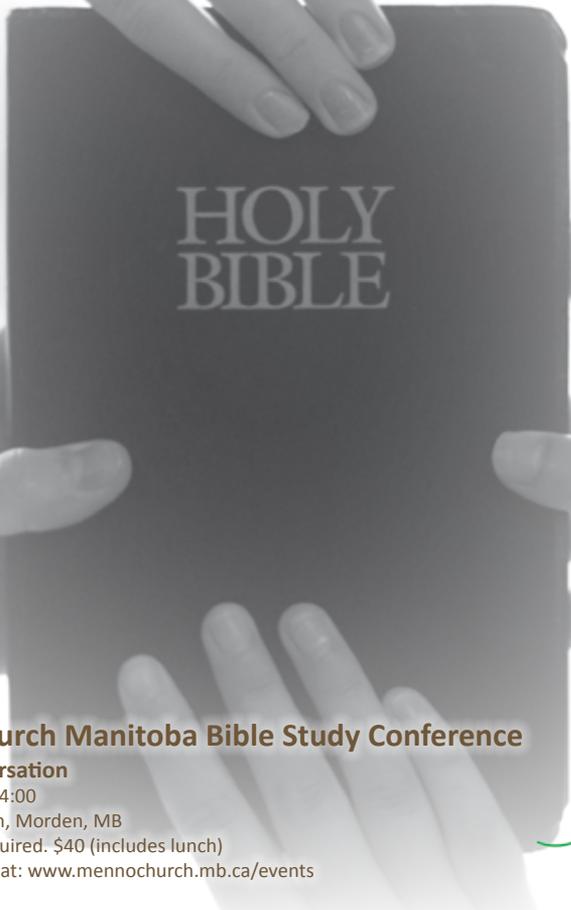


# Seeking to be Faithful Together

## The Bible and Same Sex Relationships



HOLY  
BIBLE

### **A Mennonite Church Manitoba Bible Study Conference**

**Worship, Input, Conversation**

September 26, 2015. 9:30-4:00

Morden Mennonite Church, Morden, MB

Online pre-registration required. \$40 (includes lunch)

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# Approaching the Bible Together (Michael Pahl)

1. We can agree that Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for Christian belief and practice.
2. We can agree that there is a progression in Scripture's revelation from Old Testament to New Testament, centred on Christ.
3. We can agree that we are to read Scripture through the "lens" of Christ. Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection help to clarify what is unclear, resolve what is in tension, complete what is unfinished, and prioritize what is essential in Scripture.
4. We can agree that we read Scripture in light of our reason and experience and tradition, whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

## Differences in How We Interpret the Bible (Dan Epp-Tiessen)

In the history of the church there have frequently been differences of opinion on theological and ethical issues. One factor in such disagreements is that generally there is good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of the issue. One reason we as a church are divided on the issue of same-sex relationships is because there is good biblical and theological evidence for both sides of the issue.

In practice, the church does not rely only on the Bible in its discernment process but always brings other sources of authority into the conversation, especially human reason and experience. We see the early church doing this in Acts 15, where the clinching argument is the new things which the church *sees* (i.e. human experience) God doing in the lives of Gentile believers. After its new decision, the church does not delete the circumcision and food prohibitions texts from the Bible, but it does de-emphasize such passages and decides not to follow what they command.

Sometimes science (human reason) teaches us that we need to read biblical texts in new ways. That is why we don't read the Bible as defending a flat earth anymore, unlike the church leaders who condemned the scientist Galileo's views that the earth is round and

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\* We will generally use the terms "traditional" and "affirming" to refer to the two broad views on same-sex relationships. The "traditional" view is that marriage is an exclusive, permanent, covenanted union of one man and one woman. The "affirming" view is that marriage is an exclusive, permanent, covenanted union of two persons regardless of gender.

revolves around the sun.

However, in many cases, in order to be faithful, we must continue to embrace biblical texts in a straightforward way (e.g. you shall not murder; you shall not steal). Sometimes, in order to be faithful, we must not embrace biblical texts in a straightforward way (e.g. circumcision texts, food laws, passages justifying slavery, texts commanding genocide).

Biblical marriage texts clearly envision marriage as a relationship between man and woman. Some of us believe that in order to be faithful we must embrace such texts in a straightforward way. Some of us believe that in order to be faithful we must focus on the love and commitment in a relationship between two people, regardless of their sex.

The biblical writers did not think of sexual orientation in the way that many persons do today. They believed that God had made people to be heterosexual and that to engage in same-sex activity is to express unnatural, unhealthy, and abhorrent sexual impulses. Some of us believe that these convictions reflect the will of God.

Some of us believe that these convictions reflect the culture of ancient times and that therefore we need not be bound by them. Some of us believe that modern science (human reason) and human experience teach us that people do not choose their sexual orientation. Some people are simply born same-sex attracted. Some of us believe that same-sex attracted persons are capable of living in loving, healthy, life-long, covenanted relationships just like heterosexual people. Christians in such relationships are committed to following Jesus and their lives demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit. For these reasons some of us believe that the church should welcome persons in such relationships.

In Mark 10:2-9 Jesus asserts that one of the Bible's teachings about marriage/divorce does not reflect the full will of God for relationships and must be reinterpreted. Does this suggest that some other biblical texts about marriage may not reflect the full will of God for human relationships and need to be reinterpreted?

In the Bible we see changing understandings of what faithful marriage looks like. At one time polygamy and concubinage were considered appropriate. Does this suggest that our understanding of marriage should also continue to develop, and that perhaps same-sex relationships can also be considered as marriage? Or is such development a form of human rebellion against what God has revealed about marriage being a relationship between a man and woman?

Sometimes, in order to be faithful, the church must go beyond where the biblical writers ended up ethically and theologically. From beginning to end the Bible assumes that slavery is a legitimate institution, and even New Testament texts tell slaves to be submissive to their masters (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-24; 1 Peter 2:18-21). After a long struggle, the church eventually came to recognize that it must stop supporting slavery. Is God now calling us to go beyond what the Bible assumes about all persons being heterosexual and about marriage being restricted to heterosexual persons?

Sometimes, in order to be faithful, the church must not go beyond where the biblical writers ended up ethically and theologically. Many theologians and denominations claim that the New Testament teachings about non-violence are not fully relevant for the complexities of contemporary life, and that in order to be faithful Christians must sometimes participate in war in order to restrain evil in the world. The Mennonite church has insisted that on this issue we must not go beyond those New Testament texts that call us to the non-violent way of Jesus and the cross. On the issue of same-sex relationships, is God calling us to hold fast to the Bible's teaching about marriage being a relationship between a woman and a man?

A big part of the reason for our differences of opinion on these matters is that there is good biblical and theological evidence on both sides of the issues. Some day we as Mennonite Church Manitoba and Mennonite Church Canada will arrive at greater clarity and agreement on this issue, as we have on other issues (women in church leadership, re-affirming our peace position when it was challenged by our young men who joined the military during WW II). In the meantime, may God grant us grace and wisdom in our discernment and our conversations.

## **Focusing on the New Testament (Michael Pahl)**

If we agree that there is a progression in Scripture's revelation from Old Testament to New Testament, centred on Christ, and we agree that we are to read Scripture through the "lens" of Christ (see above), then it is especially important that we examine the key New Testament texts and explore this matter in light of Jesus.

### ***1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11***

These passages include "vice lists," concise catalogues of negative behaviours, similar to other vice lists in writings from that era. These vice lists were not intended to be exhaustive but rather representative, giving a sample of sins relevant to the setting. They

were not intended to give a lot of nuance; they are “blunt instruments.” The relevant words in these lists have long been debated.

*Pornoï* is most likely a generic word for “those who commit sexual immorality—of whatever kind.”

*Malakoi* literally means “soft ones.” It was used to refer to men who were unable to control their passions—lacking self-control. Or, more often, the word referred to men who acted in effeminate ways, sometimes doing so to attract sexual partners—either women or men. Some have suggested it could refer to the passive partner in a gay sexual relationship, perhaps a male prostitute or a young boy.

*Arsenokoitai* is a rare word that literally means “man-bedders.” Paul almost certainly uses the word to refer to same-sex behaviour. However, it is not clear exactly what behaviour Paul has in mind. The traditional view argues that Paul is referring to all same-sex behaviour with this word. The affirming view normally argues that Paul is referring to exploitative same-sex acts, perhaps involving pederasty, and not sexual acts within the context of a committed and caring marriage of two adults.

### ***Romans 1:26-27***

There is a current debate among scholars as to whether Romans 1:18-32 even reflects Paul’s perspective, or if it is a perspective that Paul actually refutes starting in Romans 2:1 or even 3:21. For our discussion we will assume that Romans 1:18-32 is in fact Paul’s perspective.

In this passage Paul describes Gentile sin in generic, stereotypical ways from a Jewish perspective (he will look at Jewish sin in Romans 2). The fundamental Gentile sin, according to Paul and most Jews of his day, was idolatry: putting people or other created things in the place of God (1:18-25). Because of this fundamental sin, God has “given over” the Gentiles to further sin, for them to reap the consequences of their harmful actions.

In this context Paul clearly refers to same-sex acts (1:26-27). It is debated, however, whether Paul is referring to all same-sex acts or only certain kinds, and exactly what it is about these same-sex acts that prompts Paul’s condemnation.

Paul may be giving a blanket condemnation of all same-sex acts regardless of context or motivation. This is the argument of the traditional view. However, given that the passage repeatedly emphasizes excessive “lust” and “passions,” this may reflect a common ancient assumption that same-sex acts were the result of a lack of sexual self-control, not from an underlying inclination or orientation. Or, given the pervasive view in the ancient world that sex acts should

reflect an innate social hierarchy (male over female, free over slave, older over younger), Paul may be thinking of same-sex acts that violate this normal social order. The affirming view argues that Paul is thinking here of promiscuous or exploitative same-sex behaviour, and not sexual acts within the context of a committed and caring marriage of two adults.

A key part of this discussion is determining exactly what Paul means when he talks about these acts as “unnatural” or “contrary to nature” (*para phusin*). The traditional view argues that this means “contrary to the divinely created order” and thus unchangeable. The affirming view normally argues that this means “contrary to social norms” which do change. Paul’s use of “nature” (*phusis*) language elsewhere is ambiguous: for example, in Romans 11:16-24 Paul speaks of God himself doing something “contrary to nature” (*para phusin*) by grafting Gentiles in among Israel; and in 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 Paul argues for women wearing head coverings for prayer on the basis of what is “natural” (*phusis*), yet most Christians today do not follow this practice.

### ***Jesus’ Life and Teachings***

Jesus refers back to Genesis 1-2 in response to a question regarding divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12). He does so to affirm the Genesis emphasis on marriage being a union of two persons that creates a new, permanent kinship group (“one flesh”) which should only be dissolved in particular, extreme situations. Both the affirming and traditional views can read the passage this way. The traditional view, however, sees Jesus as going further than this, specifically defining marriage as between one man and one woman.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus goes on to teach that not all people must marry, but that God gives some the gift of lifelong celibacy (19:10-12). In this he speaks of those who are “eunuchs from birth,” which some have interpreted as including gay persons. Furthermore, although Jesus affirms the permanence of marriage, he also points forward to the resurrection age when people “will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (e.g. Luke 20:27-38).

These teachings of Jesus are probably behind Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7. There Paul likewise affirms that marriage should be honoured as a permanent union until death, allowing for some possible exceptions in extreme circumstances. He also, like Jesus, affirms that celibate singleness is a gift from God that at least some Christians should seek in light of the coming end of the age. These Jesus traditions may also be behind Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:28 that “there is no longer male and female...in Christ Jesus.” Gen-

der distinctions will be obsolete in the coming age, and so they are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the present age.

At the heart of Jesus' ethical teaching, his teaching on the kingdom of God, his example in his healing miracles, and his example in his suffering and death on the cross, is his call to selfless, self-giving love. We are called to obey Jesus in this teaching and to follow him in his example, loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbours as we love ourselves. Jesus is clear, further, that "neighbours" includes our enemies: those who are not like us, or who even disagree with us, or even oppose us, or even cause us harm.

## **Moving Forward: Some Suggested Points of Agreement (Michael Pahl)**

1. We should be able to affirm together the essentials of historic Christian faith and practice. Matters of sexuality are important, but they are not found in any of the New Testament's gospel summaries or in any of the earliest Christian creeds. The gospel should transform our sexuality, but sexuality is not the gospel.
2. We should be able to affirm together that the Greatest Commandment is God's foundational and comprehensive moral imperative for humanity: we are all called to love God and others with the selfless, self-giving love that Jesus taught and exemplified.
3. We should be able to affirm together the goodness of human sexuality as created by God, with sexual acts intended for exclusive, covenanted unions between two persons (i.e. marriage).
4. We should be able to affirm together the goodness of both singleness and marriage. Both celibacy and marriage are gifts from God, given as God so chooses.
5. We should be able to affirm together the harmfulness of sinful sexual behaviours such as sexual violence, exploitation, degradation, infidelity, and promiscuity. These are neither heterosexual nor homosexual sins; they are human sins.

## Further Resources

- Loren Johns, *Resources on Homosexuality*. Online: <http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/6/11513>. Links to official documents of various Mennonite church bodies, including the documents for Mennonite Church Canada's "Being a Faithful Church" discernment process.
- Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon, 2003). An advanced-level presentation of the traditional view.
- James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans, 2013). An advanced-level presentation of the affirming view.
- Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Zondervan, 2015). A mid-level presentation of the traditional view.
- Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent, 2014). A mid-level presentation of the affirming view.
- Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Zondervan, 2010). An autobiographical, easy-to-read introduction to the traditional view.
- Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate* (Jericho, 2013). An autobiographical, easy-to-read introduction to the affirming view.
- Through My Eyes*. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QImNx1JA3BI>. Interviews with young Christian men and women, stories of wrestling with their sexuality in light of their faith.

